

ALDEN HOUSE

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DISCOVERING HISTORY

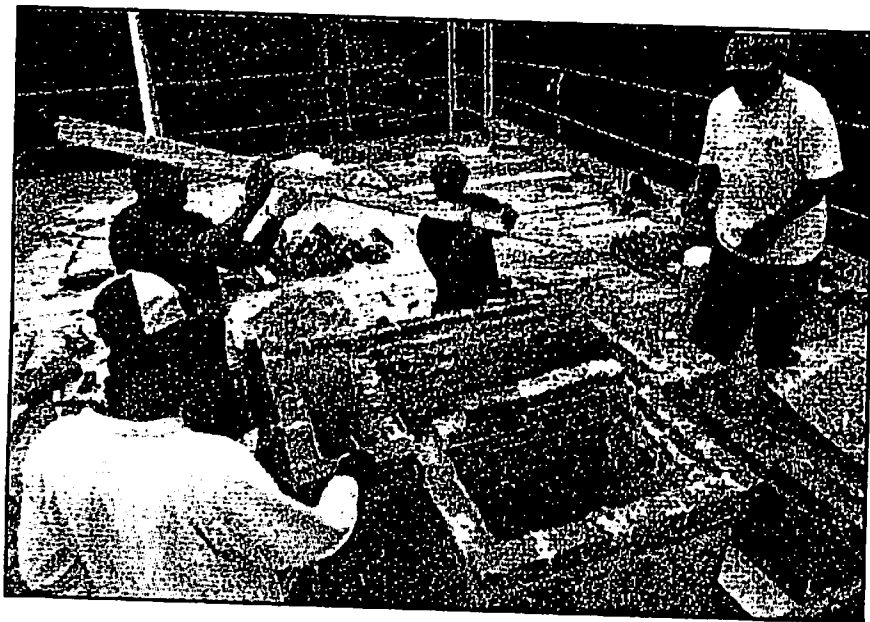


■ Anthony Haskett, a restoration specialist who is part of a team of masons from Williamsburg, Va., works on the chimney of the historic Alden House in Duxbury.

LISA HORNAK photos/For The Patriot Ledger

ALDEN HOUSE RESTORATION

After more than 3 centuries, John's and Priscilla's home being safeguarded



From left, Allen Clary, Lawrence Waller, Anthony Haskett and Andre Holloway work on the chimney of the historic Alden House in Duxbury.

The courtship of John and Priscilla

The courtship of John Alden and Priscilla Mullins is the oldest love triangle in America. As legend tells it, Miles Standish, a widower and captain of the new Plymouth colony, sent

Alden to ask for Priscilla's hand in marriage. Priscilla's answer, first told as Alden family stories, was immortalized in a poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow:

"Archly the maiden smiled, and, with eyes over-running with laughter, Said, in a tremulous voice, 'Why don't you speak for yourself, John?'"

By **HEATHER GEHLERT**
The Patriot Ledger

DUXBURY

The legendary romance of Pilgrims John and Priscilla Alden has survived for 350 years.

So has the property where they settled in Duxbury.

Still standing after more than three centuries, two additions and several renovations, their house now provides Duxbury residents with clues to the town's past.

"Eight generations have lived there," said curator James Baker. "The house is not just a static snapshot. It's more of a dynamic story and you can see the history of the family and the town."

Behind every wall is the tale of an Alden birth or death, and each addition or upgrade marks the start or end of an era.

So when architect and Alden family descendent Will Gwilliam visited the two-story home and saw that the chimney's bricks were crumbling from too many years of water damage, he decided to do something about it.

Gwilliam, with a team of six masons from Williamsburg, Va., is working to preserve the house and its rich history.

Brick by brick, the masons are rebuilding the

After 3½ centuries, a major restoration

■ ALDEN

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chimney. They began the project last Tuesday and for another seven days will be working 30 feet above the ground on a scaffold that sways ever so slightly with a strong gust of wind or shift of weight.

The job is delicate and dangerous work, something that mason Jack Peet said other masons often don't want to do or think they can't.

Gwilliam, who has been in restoration for about 50 years, said he could have brought other masons on board but he has worked with this group before and has "faith in them."

"We're just that good," said mason Lawrence Waller.

The extent of the chimney damage is unknown, but Linda Osborne, president of the Alden Kindred of America, a group of descendants who own and maintain the land,

said the restoration couldn't wait.

"If we don't do something about it, we're going to lose it," she said. "If the chimney went, it'd take half of the house with it."

But the work is more than just restorative, said Gwilliam. "It's investigative."

"This is a puzzle," he said. "There is no right answer. There is no wrong answer."

Gwilliam began putting the pieces together five years ago. At that time, the house was showing serious signs of aging, but no one knew what needed to be done because no one knew the size or appearance of the original structure.

Using old sketches and photographs, Gwilliam created about a dozen scaled, detailed drawings of the original and current home and chimney.

In the process, he learned what folklore has held true for decades: the existing



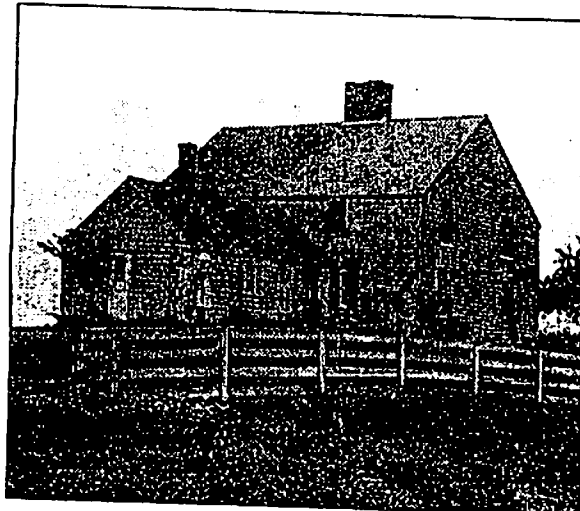
LISA HORNAK/For The Patriot Ledger

Will Gwilliam, an architect and Alden family descendent, points out the details on an original brick from the chimney of the Alden House in Duxbury.

house was not the first Alden home in Duxbury.

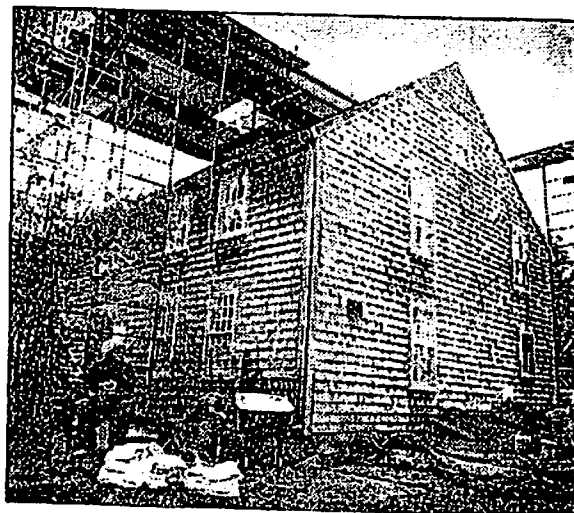
Gwilliam extracted small strips of wood from the

kitchen, roof and sill – the wooden support that runs along the perimeter and bears most of the structure's



File photo

This photograph of the Alden House is believed to be from the late 1800s or early 1900s.



AMELIA KUNHARDT/The Patriot Ledger

Scaffolding holds up a work platform while masons restore the chimney at the Alden House.

weight – then sent the segments to analysts at Columbia University. Using an age-determining process called dendrochronology, the analysts surmised that the wood from the sill dated back to 1628.

Theory now holds that John and Priscilla Alden once lived 300 yards east of the present house and used lumber from the first house to construct the second.

The land, granted to John and Priscilla Alden in the 1620s, is a rarity because it is the last surviving property from the settlers land division. The home has never been owned by anyone outside of the Alden family.

Heather Gehlert may be reached at hgehlert@ledger.com.

See the team in action

■ Watch firsthand as the masons restore the Alden House chimney. The house and grounds, at 105 Alden St. in Duxbury, is open to the public from noon to 4 p.m. Monday through Saturday.

■ Learn how it's done. Expert mason Jack Peet will give a lecture on the craft of historic masonry at 7:30 p.m. tomorrow in the Alden House Historic Site Exhibits Barn.

■ Meet the masons: Jack Peet, Andre Holloway, Antonio Haskett, Anthony Haskett, Lawrence Waller and Allen Clary.

Rebuilding history, one brick at a time

With hammers and chisels, the masons applied pressure to existing mortar cracks and removed the cap entirely on the chimney of the Alden House.

With the cap off, the masons are scraping away a thin layer of cement-based mortar, called parging, that surrounds the outside of the chimney. The parging, hard and rigid, has not allowed the chimney to "breathe," which has exacerbated the moisture problem, said architect Will Gwilliam.

Once the bricks and "joints," or spacing between the bricks, are exposed, a team of masons from Williamsburg, Va., must purge the old mortar from the joints. Filling bucket after bucket with the old mortar, the masons use a nylon rope and pulley system to lower the debris from their workspace before throwing it into a nearby Dumpster.

Old mortar removed, the masons clean the chimney's bare joints and refill them with a soft lime mortar that they mix using two parts burned oyster-shell, one part sand and a splash of water. They are using lime mortar instead of a more modern variety because it is strong but flexible and contracts and expands as the temperature fluctuates.

After refilling the joints, they will replace the parging with the same lime mortar, rebuild the cap, and install two dampers in place of the aluminum cover on the chimney top for better air flow.

If time and money permit, the crew will install a chimney liner, but the team still has fund-raising to do. Gwilliam estimates the project will cost \$80,000. Donations can be made to the Alden Kindred of America, P.O. Box 2754, Duxbury, MA 02331.

- HEATHER GEHLERT